R.L. STINE

Goosebumps

PRESENTS

TV BOOK #17

CALLING ALL CREEPS!

WITH EIGHT PAGES OF COLOR PHOTOS FROM THE SHOW!

BASED ON THE HOT TV SERIES

SCHOLASTIC

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1

"Just a few more feet," I whispered. I stretched my arm as high as I could. I reached for the top of the chain-link fence.

Got it!

It's a great plan, I told myself. A plan that will work.

"Unh!" I grunted as I scrambled over the top of the fence. I stretched my foot down, feeling around for a foothold.

WHAM! I slipped and slammed into the ground. Mud spattered all over me. "Great," I muttered. I wiped my glasses on my shirt.

When I put them back on, I could hardly see through the streaks of mud. I glanced around.

The school yard is kind of spooky at night, I thought. Most of the school was dark. Dim lights glowed around the yard and in a few scattered windows.

My name is Ricky Beamer. I'm twelve years old, but I look younger because I'm small for my age. Some people think I'm kind of a nerd.

Maybe I am. But at least I'm not a *creep*!

But try telling that to Tasha McClain. Stuck-up, name-calling Tasha McClain.

Just thinking about her makes me shudder. My life would be great if it weren't for Tasha. She's always playing mean tricks on me. And she never gets caught!

Tasha started calling me Ricky the Rat. Now all the other kids at school call me that — except when they're calling me Creep. Tasha made up that nickname for me, too. I hate it! I can't get through a day of school without hearing those mean names. All because of Tasha.

That's why I was sneaking into the school

after dark. I finally figured out how to get back at her.

I glanced around the school yard again.

Good. Still empty.

I darted across the yard. I ducked down beneath a window. I had unlocked the window before I left school that afternoon. I poked my head up over the windowsill.

There she was. My enemy.

Tasha McClain sat at the computer. Our English teacher, Ms. Richards, stood over her.

I knew what Tasha was working on. The school newspaper. She thinks she's a big shot because she's the editor.

I work on the paper, too. Only Tasha never lets me do a story. "What would you write about, Creep?" she always says. "'My Life as Ricky the Rat'? 'The Care and Feeding of a Creep'?"

Tasha thinks she's so funny. But *she's* the creep. It made my stomach hurt to see her smile so sweetly at Ms. Richards.

Tomorrow, I'll be the one smiling.

My hands clutched the windowsill. Tasha and Ms. Richards were leaving! Time to put my plan into action.

I watched them turn out the lights. Then they left the room. I slid open the window and slipped inside.

I hurried over to the computer terminal.

There it was, still on the screen. Our school newspaper, *The Harding Herald.* Perfect! They left the computer on and the file open.

This was going to be easy!

"Nice job, Tasha," I murmured. "I hope you like my little addition." I hit some buttons, then typed in my very special message:

CALLING ALL CREEPS! CALLING ALL CREEPS!
IF YOU'RE A REAL CREEP,
CALL TASHA MCCLAIN AT 555–6709.

I gazed at the glowing screen. A smile spread across my face. I thought of one more perfect thing to add. My fingers flew across the keyboard:

PLEASE CALL AFTER MIDNIGHT.

Perfect! I chuckled as I hit Save. The

screen vanished. My plan was finished. I turned to leave.

Then I froze.

Voices! Right outside the door!

Tasha and Ms. Richards were coming back!

"I'm sorry, Ms. Richards," I heard Tasha say. "But I have a feeling I forgot to turn off the computer."

"Don't worry," Ms. Richards replied. "We'll just check."

I raced across the room. I dove out the window. Something tugged my foot, but I made it through.

Phew!

I took a step. The ground felt weird. I glanced down at my feet. One brown shoe.

And one blue sock.

Oh, no! My shoe! It fell off! It must have caught on the windowsill.

I spun around and stared at the window.

My shoe sat on the sill. Right inside the classroom — where Tasha and Ms. Richards would find it.

Quickly, I leaned back through the window. I reached out for my shoe.

I heard a key turn in the door lock!

They were almost inside.

I reached out again. My fingers wrapped around the shoe. Got it!

I pulled back. But my shirt snagged on the windowsill.

Oh, no — I was stuck!

I've got to get out of here! I thought. Now!

I yanked at my shirt. But it was hooked on a nail or a splinter.

I glanced up at the classroom door. The knob was turning!

I was caught!

2

Oh, no! I'm caught!

Detention! Or worse . . . suspension! At the very least, a note home to my parents. That was what would happen if Ms. Richards caught me here.

And worst of all — Tasha's know-it-all face. She would make fun of me for the rest of my life.

Ms. Richards flipped on the lights.

I dug my heels into the ground. I leaned back with all my weight. I yanked my shirt as hard as I could.

Riiiiiiip!

The tiny piece that was hooked on the windowsill tore off. I fell backwards into the dirt.

I didn't dare move. My heart pounded. Had they seen me?

"I was right," Tasha declared. "I did forget to turn it off." I could hear her moving over to the computer.

Ms. Richards laughed. "I'm as forgetful as you are, Tasha," she said. "I forgot to close the window."

Oh, no! Tasha was walking right toward the window — right toward me! I pressed my back against the side of the building. Tasha popped her head out the window, right above me.

Please don't look down, I thought. Don't look down!

Tasha looked first one way, then the other way. She ducked back inside. The window slammed shut.

I let out a relieved sigh. She didn't see me.

Now I just had to wait until tomorrow — when I would get my revenge!

"Ricky the Rat!"

I turned away from my locker — and saw

Tasha walking down the hallway. She and her friend Kim were giggling.

"Hey, Tasha," I called. "Has this week's newspaper come out yet?"

"The paper's going to be a little late today," Tasha told me. She flipped her dark hair over her shoulder. "Got that, Creep?"

Kim laughed as she followed Tasha down the hall.

"You just wait," I muttered. "I'll get my revenge." I turned back to my locker. A heavy hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me back around.

My heart sank when I saw them — David, Wart, and Brenda.

The school bullies.

They were always together. And picking on me seemed to be their favorite sport.

"Well, well, well." David sneered at me. "If it isn't Ricky the Rat."

"Don't call me that," I said.

"Why not? Everyone else does," Brenda put in. "Breathe on him, Wart."

Wart is the biggest kid in school. But he al-

ways does whatever Brenda tells him to do. He tugged on his backwards baseball cap. Then he breathed right in my face.

"Yuck!" His stinky breath made my eyes water.

Wart held up an onion. It had a huge bite mark in it.

Eeeeeewwwww! He was eating a raw onion! He chomped down on it again.

"I love onions," he mumbled with his mouth full.

"Um, that's great." I tried to step past them. Wart slammed me back into my locker. David and Brenda smiled at each other.

"Sing for us, Rat," David ordered.

"Yeah!" Brenda chuckled. "Sing 'Mary Had a Little Lamb.'"

"W-why?" I asked. I could feel my combination lock pressing into my back.

"Because we love farm animals," David replied. "Now sing! Unless you want another blast of Wart's onion breath. Up close. While he pounds you."

Wart took a big bite of the onion and grinned.

"Okay! Okay!" I started singing.

Totally embarrassing. By the time I got to "fleece as white as snow," a whole crowd of kids had gathered.

And they were all laughing. Especially Tasha.

"Louder!" Brenda hollered. "The next verse!"

I glanced at Wart. He squeezed the onion between his fingers to form a tight fist. Juice dribbled down his hand. He shook his clenched fist at me.

"Everywhere that Mary went . . ." I sang.

"What's going on here?" a deep voice boomed. The principal, Mr. Pietrowski, walked over to the group of kids. Quickly, everyone ran off to their classes.

Mr. Pietrowski frowned at them.

I fumbled at my locker, trying to pretend nothing was wrong. A couple of kids giggled as they passed me.

When I thought everyone was gone, I turned around again. A girl I didn't know stood in front of me.

"At least you knew all the words," she joked. But she wasn't making fun of me. She gave me a friendly smile.

"Yeah," I muttered. We walked down the hallway together.

"I hate it when kids pick on someone that way," the girl added.

"Yeah, me, too. Especially when it's me getting picked on!"

"I'm Iris Candler," the girl told me. "I just moved here."

"I'm Ricky Beamer," I replied. I let out a long sigh. "I wish I never lived here."

Iris laughed. She pushed her long dark hair behind her ears. "Can you tell me how to get to the cafeteria?" she asked. "I have lunch now."

"Me, too!" I replied. "I'll go with you."

I led Iris to the cafeteria. "This is where we pick up the trays," I told her. "And that's where most of the lunch ends up." I pointed at the large garbage can.

Iris giggled as we got in line for food. "Is it that bad?" she asked.

"Some days," I answered. I held out my plate to a cafeteria worker. *SPLAT!* Macaroni and cheese landed on my dish. We moved down the line.

Iris held out her plate to a different worker. I snatched it away. "Don't get that!" I cautioned her. "That's the Tuna Surprise. No one eats the Tuna Surprise!"

"Thanks for the warning!" Iris grinned. "In that case, I'll have the stew."

"Wise choice," I told her. I grabbed a piece of cake from the counter. Then I gazed around the lunchroom, searching for a seat.

Iris stood beside me. "Thanks for showing me around like this," she said.

I smiled at her. "I can't believe you're even talking to me," I admitted.

She looked puzzled. "Why?"

I felt my face grow warm. "I-I don't know," I stammered. I didn't want to tell Iris that I was the school nerd. Obviously she hadn't heard about me yet.

Well, Tasha will get to her soon, I thought. She'll tell Iris not to go near me.

"I guess we should find a place to sit down," I said.

Iris glanced around the cafeteria. "There's a spot."

I followed Iris to the back of the cafeteria. We passed Wart, David, and Brenda. Luckily they were busy eating — they didn't pay any attention to me.

WHAM!

I tripped over something on the floor. I landed facedown on top of my tray.

My nose pressed into the cake.

Everyone in the entire lunchroom burst out laughing. Well, everyone except for Iris. I sat up and wiped the frosting off my face. Vanilla covered my glasses.

Wart grinned at me and pulled his foot back in. He trips me every chance he gets.

Then I heard Tasha's voice. "So the creep is also a klutz!" she teased. I glared at her through my frosting-covered glasses. Then I scrambled to my feet.

Tasha is going to be sorry, I vowed. Then I'll find a way to make the bullies sorry, too.

I stormed out of the lunchroom.

"Ricky, wait up!" Iris called. She ran behind me out into the hallway.

I slowed down and waited for her to catch up. "That was really mean," she said. "That big guy tripped you."

"They're going to pay," I told her. "First Tasha. Then the rest of those jerks."

"Ricky —" Iris began.

"My plan is already set." I cut her off. "After today, Tasha is going to wish she had never been born."

Iris stared at me. "What did you do?" she asked.

I glanced down at the mess dripping down the front of my shirt. "I can't talk now," I replied. "Just make sure to read the school newspaper today."

I started toward the boys' room.

Yes. After today, everything would be different.

I couldn't wait!

3

BRRRRRRINNNNNG!BRRRRIIINNNNNG!

I sat up in bed. What was that noise?

BRRRRRRIIINNNNG!

I grabbed the phone with my eyes still closed. "Hello?" I murmured.

There was a long silence. Then a low, scratchy voice came over the line. "I saw your message in the paper," the voice croaked.

"Huh? What?" I mumbled.

"I saw your message in the paper," the voice repeated.

What was this person talking about? I

didn't recognize the voice at all. "Who is this?" I asked.

"I'm a Creep," the voice croaked. "I'm calling as instructed."

I hung up the receiver. I stared at the phone for a second. Then I remembered — the message in the paper! Calling all Creeps. The caller must have seen the notice I put in *The Harding Herald!*

But why are they calling *me*? I wondered. They're supposed to be calling *Tasha*.

What went wrong?

The phone rang again. I grabbed it before it woke up my parents.

"Hello?" I whispered.

"I'm a Creep," a different voice murmured. It sounded like a girl — sort of. "I saw your message. I'm ready to plant. Ready to rule! When do we meet?"

I slammed the phone down. I slammed it so hard, it fell off my night table.

What was going on?

* * *

"'Calling all Creeps. Calling all Creeps,'" I read aloud the next morning. "'If you're a real Creep, call *Ricky Beamer*'?" I slumped against the school wall.

I stared down at the crumpled newspaper in my hands. Now I understood why I had gotten those phone calls last night!

My special message — someone had changed it. Tasha's name and phone number weren't listed.

Mine were.

Iris bounded down the hallway toward me. She noticed me holding the paper. "I saw the message," she said. "Did you get a lot of calls?"

Before I could answer, Tasha walked up behind me. "Yeah, Ricky," she teased. "Did you get a lot of calls?"

I ignored her. I folded the newspaper and shoved it into my notebook.

"It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out your little trick," Tasha continued. "I noticed it right away. Who else would try something so dumb? Only a creep would put in an

ad for creeps. All I did was change the name and the phone number. Easy."

I was so angry, my hands shook. But I couldn't think of anything to say.

Tasha snorted. "See you around, Creep." She headed off down the hallway.

"I thought it was such a great plan!" I slammed my notebook against the wall. "My parents were so mad that people called in the middle of the night — the third call woke them up!"

"Don't worry. You probably won't get any more calls," Iris told me. "Kids will forget about it right away."

I gazed at her. "Maybe," I said. Over Iris's shoulder, I noticed Brenda, Wart, and David heading right toward us. "Oh, great. Now I'm really in trouble."

I stood up very straight, trying to make myself taller. I clenched my teeth. I clutched my notebook so hard, my knuckles turned white.

Those three never pass by me without

making fun of me. What would they do this time?

But the bullies didn't stop. They walked slowly by me. And all three of them did something really weird.

They *smiled* at me.

When I walked into the cafeteria at lunchtime, Brenda, Wart, and David were already there. But instead of picking on me, calling me names, or tripping me, they just smiled and nodded at me.

Weird.

I sat by myself to eat. That wasn't weird. That was normal.

POP! Something hit me on the side of my head. A crumpled piece of paper landed in my lunch.

I glanced around. Nobody was paying any attention to me. I had no idea who threw the paper. I fished it out of my meat loaf and unfolded it.

There was writing on the paper. WHEN WILL THE CREEPS MEET? it read.

Huh?

I peered around the cafeteria. All the kids were talking, laughing, eating. Not a single one looked at me. Nobody watched to see my reaction. Or waited for an answer.

I crumpled up the paper again. It must be some kind of joke, I figured.

When the bell rang for the next class, I tossed my lunch in the garbage. Then I joined the crowds of kids in the hall. I had to go all the way across the school to get to my history class.

"My history book!" I smacked my forehead. I had left the book in my locker. Now I would be late to class for sure.

I raced through the halls. I skidded around the corner.

And stopped dead in my tracks.

I stared at my locker.

A thick, red liquid dripped through the slats in my locker door. A little puddle was forming on the floor.

Is that *blood*? I thought in horror.

I walked a few steps closer. I reached out

and touched the liquid with my shaking finger.

It felt sticky.

I held my finger to my face. I sniffed.

"Paint," I murmured. Not blood. Definitely paint. But where did it come from?

I opened my locker and stared at the inside of the door.

Paint. Red paint on my locker door. In large dripping letters was the message:

WHEN WILL THE CREEPS MEET?

4

A hand grabbed my shoulder.

"Ahhhh!" I spun around.

It was Iris.

"Y-you scared me," I stammered.

"What's all this?" she asked. She gazed at the paint on the floor and the message in my locker.

"I don't know," I replied. "Everything is getting weird."

"Weird how?" Iris asked.

"Well, first those phone calls last night," I explained.

Iris waved her copy of *The Harding Herald* at me. "What did you expect?"

"But it's not just that," I went on. "Today

at lunch nobody picked on me. It was as if I were invisible or something. Now this."

"Just forget about it." Iris shook her head. "I have an idea. You know the school bake sale this Friday?"

I nodded.

"I was going to bake some cookies," Iris continued. "Do you want to help me?"

I stared at her. "Really?" I squeaked. I cleared my throat. "Me? Help *you*?"

Now things were definitely getting weird. A girl actually wanted to hang out with me.

Iris gazed at her shoes. "I know it sounds boring."

"No!" I cut her off. "I'd love to. I mean, it's just that no one has ever . . . well . . ."

Iris was looking at me with a confused expression on her face. I sound like a total nerd, I realized.

"Um, when are you baking?" I asked.

Iris smiled. "After school — the day after tomorrow. Meet me at the yogurt shop."

I watched her take off down the hall.

"Thursday. Yogurt shop. Got it," I called after her.

My locker was still open. The paint dripped all the way down the door into the puddle on the floor. I followed its trail with my eyes. Right onto my new shoes.

I sighed. "Terrific," I muttered.

I glanced at my clock. Midnight. I stared at the telephone. "Maybe it won't ring," I murmured.

The whole house was quiet.

I hoped it would stay that way! My parents were really angry about the calls last night.

"Maybe everyone is sick of Tasha's joke," I whispered. I watched the numbers on the clock click by — 12:01, 12:02, 12:03.

When the numbers hit 12:10, I smiled. "It's all over."

I reached for my lamp.

The phone rang before I could flip the switch. I snatched up the receiver.

"I'm a Creep," a scratchy voice whispered.

THE ARDMORE SCHOOL

"I saw your message. When are we meeting?"

I hung up.

It rang again a second later.

Slowly, I brought the phone to my ear.

"It's time." This was a different voice. A nastier voice.

"T-time?" I stammered.

"Time to plant the seeds," the voice went on. "Are you ready?"

My mouth fell open, but no words came out. What was this person talking about?

"Are you ready to plant the seeds?" the voice demanded.

I slammed the phone down hard. Then I picked it back up. I heard a dial tone.

I'll just leave it off the hook, I thought.

My heart was racing. This whole joke was getting too strange.

I lay down and stared at the ceiling. No matter how hard I thought, I couldn't figure out what the voice was talking about. What did it mean about planting seeds?

Seeds for what?

* * *

The next day at school was still strange. Nobody picked on me. Well, except Tasha. But the bullies just smiled whenever they saw me.

As I walked home from school, I wondered if I should tell my parents about the phone calls. They were really starting to bother me.

My heart beat a little faster as I passed by the woods. They've always made me nervous. They have lots of scary shadows and thick bushes.

I peered into the trees. Nothing moved.

I walked faster anyway.

Then I heard a soft sound. What was that? I stopped and glanced around. Were those *footsteps*?

It's my imagination, I thought.

I took another step. An arm wrapped around my neck from behind.

"Aaaaah!" I screamed.

I clawed at the arm, but it didn't let go. It dragged me backwards into the woods!

5

The arm dragged me into a clearing in the woods. It slammed me into the trunk of a large tree. I pushed my glasses up my nose and stared — at Wart, Brenda, and David.

The school bullies.

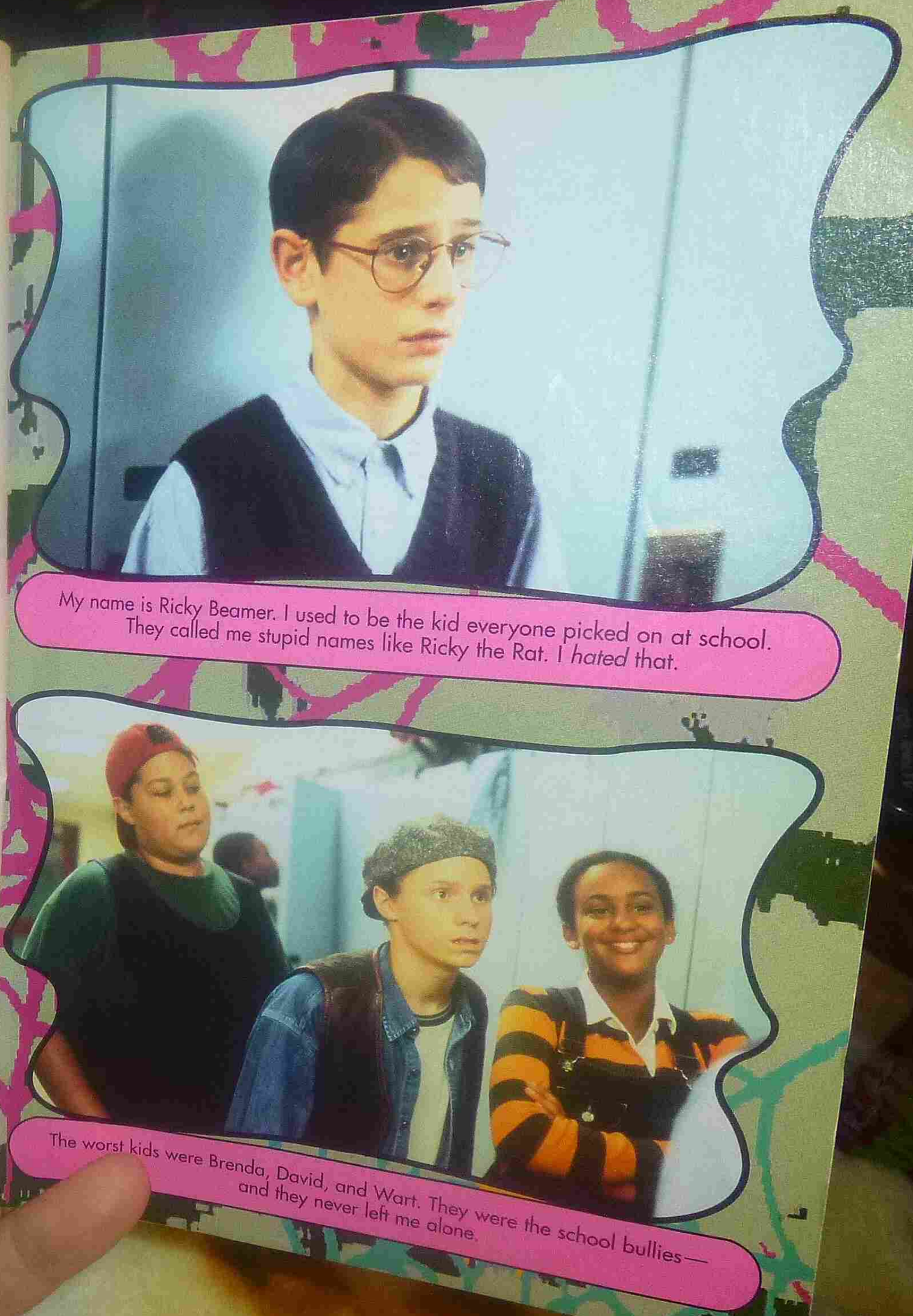
"Oh," I said, brushing off my jeans. "It's you."

They didn't answer. They just watched me.

"Look," I said. "I have to get home. Can I go now?"

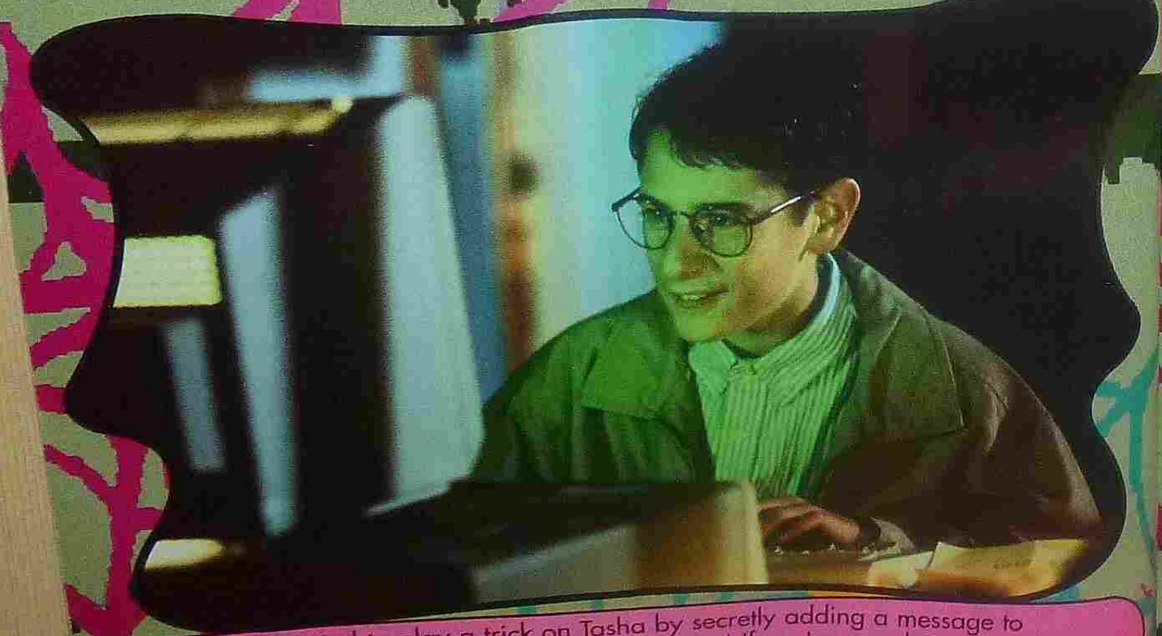
I tried to step away from the tree. Brenda, Wart, and David moved in on me. I was trapped.

They hadn't said anything since they grabbed me.

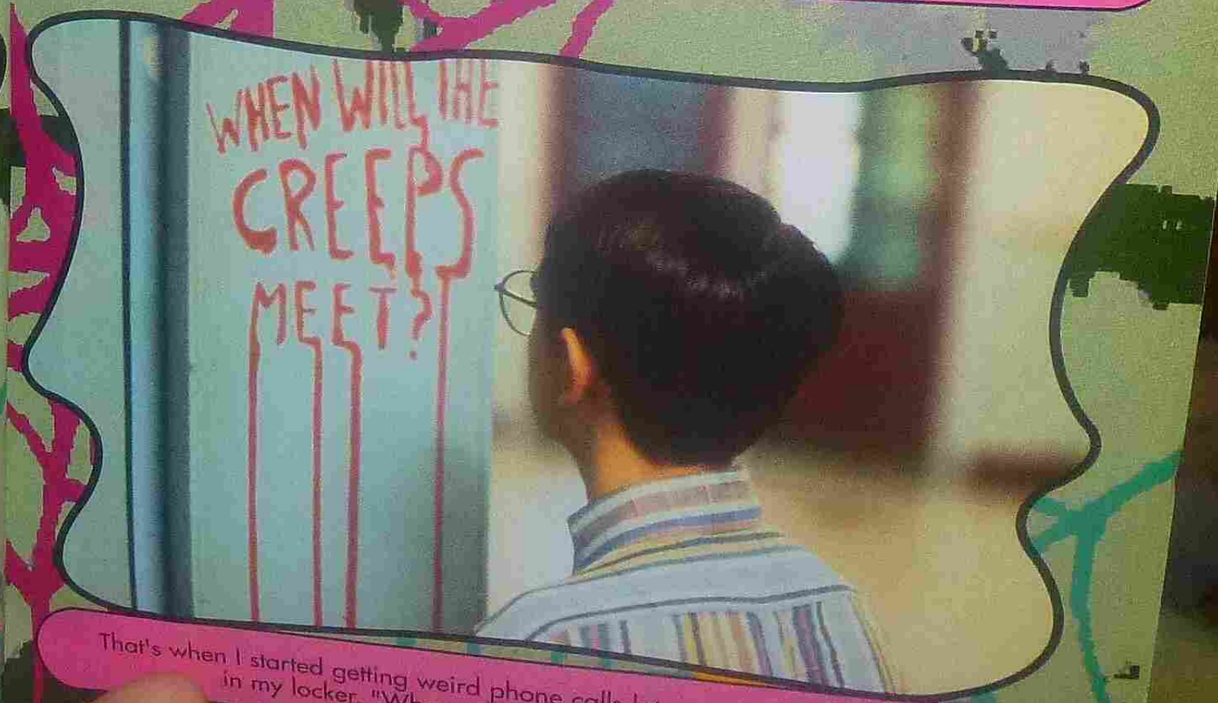

My name is Ricky Beamer. I used to be the kid everyone picked on at school. They called me stupid names like Ricky the Rat. I *hated* that.
The worst kids were Brenda, David, and Wart. They were the school bullies— and they never left me alone.

And don't forget Tasha McClain—the editor of the school newspaper. She's the one who started it all. I couldn't stand her.

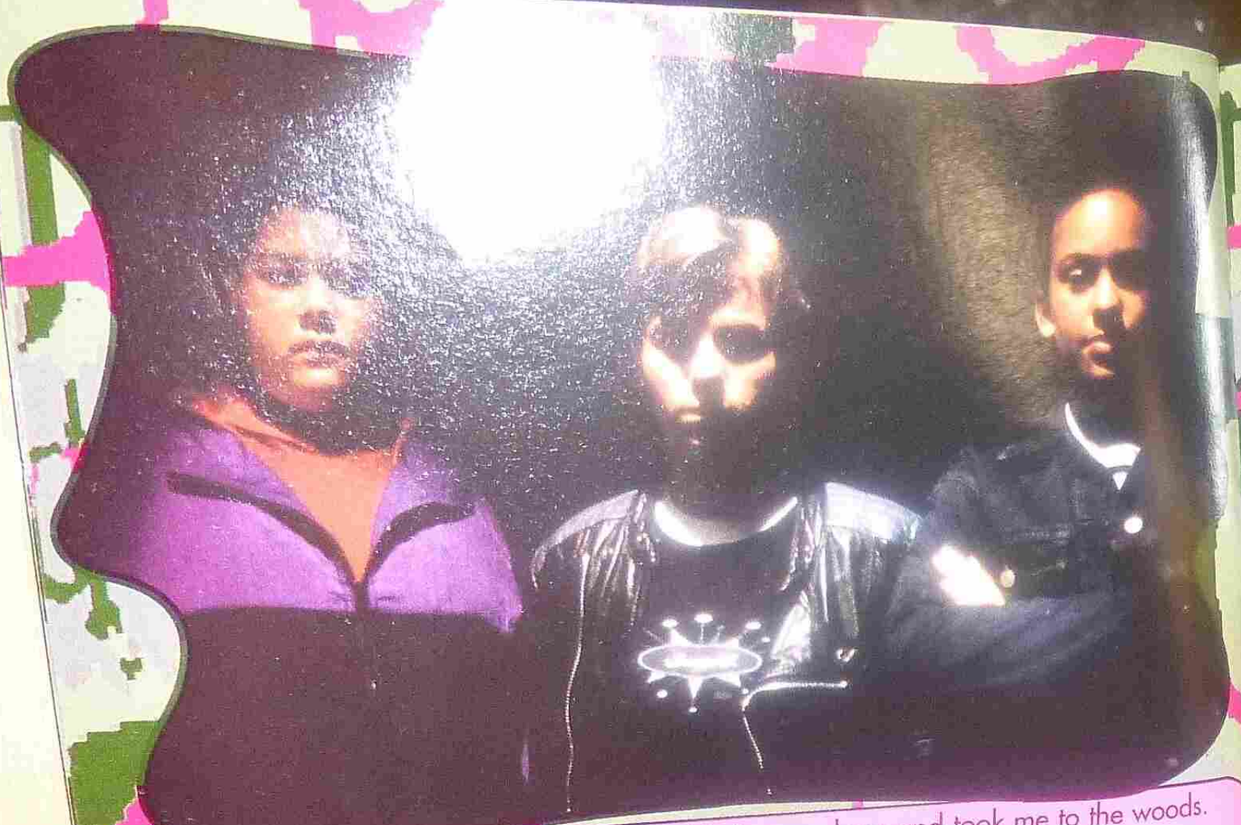
But my friend, Iris, showed me the paper the next day—and *my* name and number were in there, not Tasha's! I couldn't believe it.



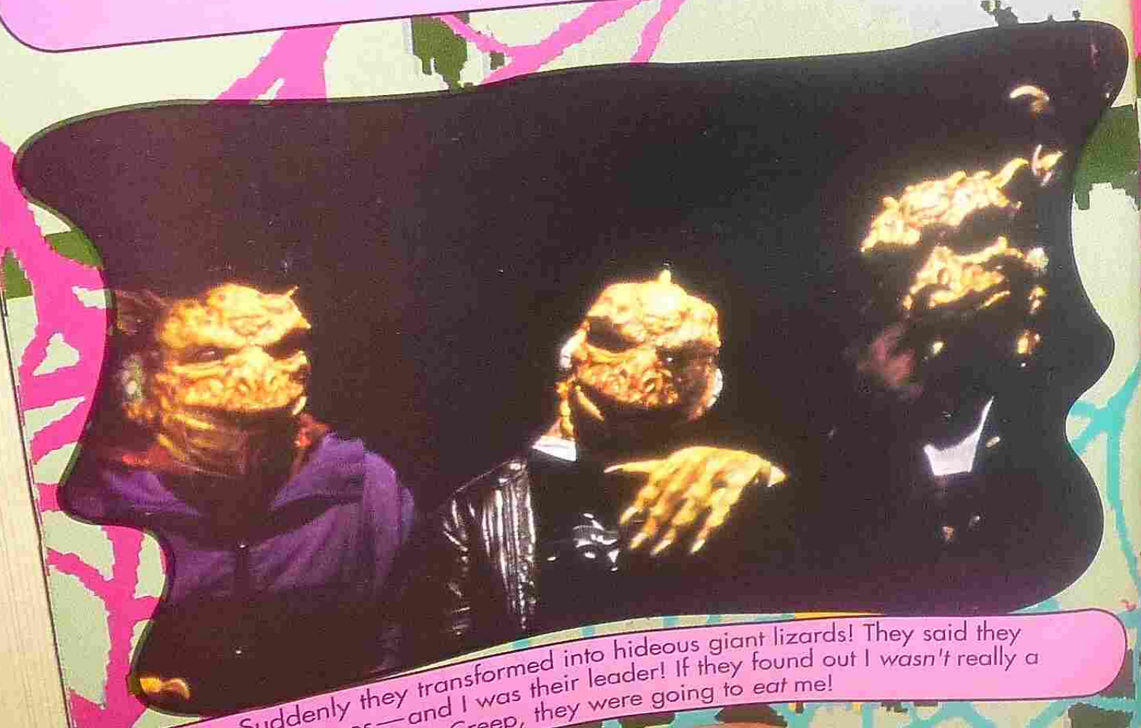
Once I tried to play a trick on Tasha by secretly adding a message to the school paper. It said: "Calling All Creeps! If you're a real Creep, call Tasha McClain at 555-6709."



That's when I started getting weird phone calls late at night—and messages in my locker. "When will the Creeps meet?" one said.

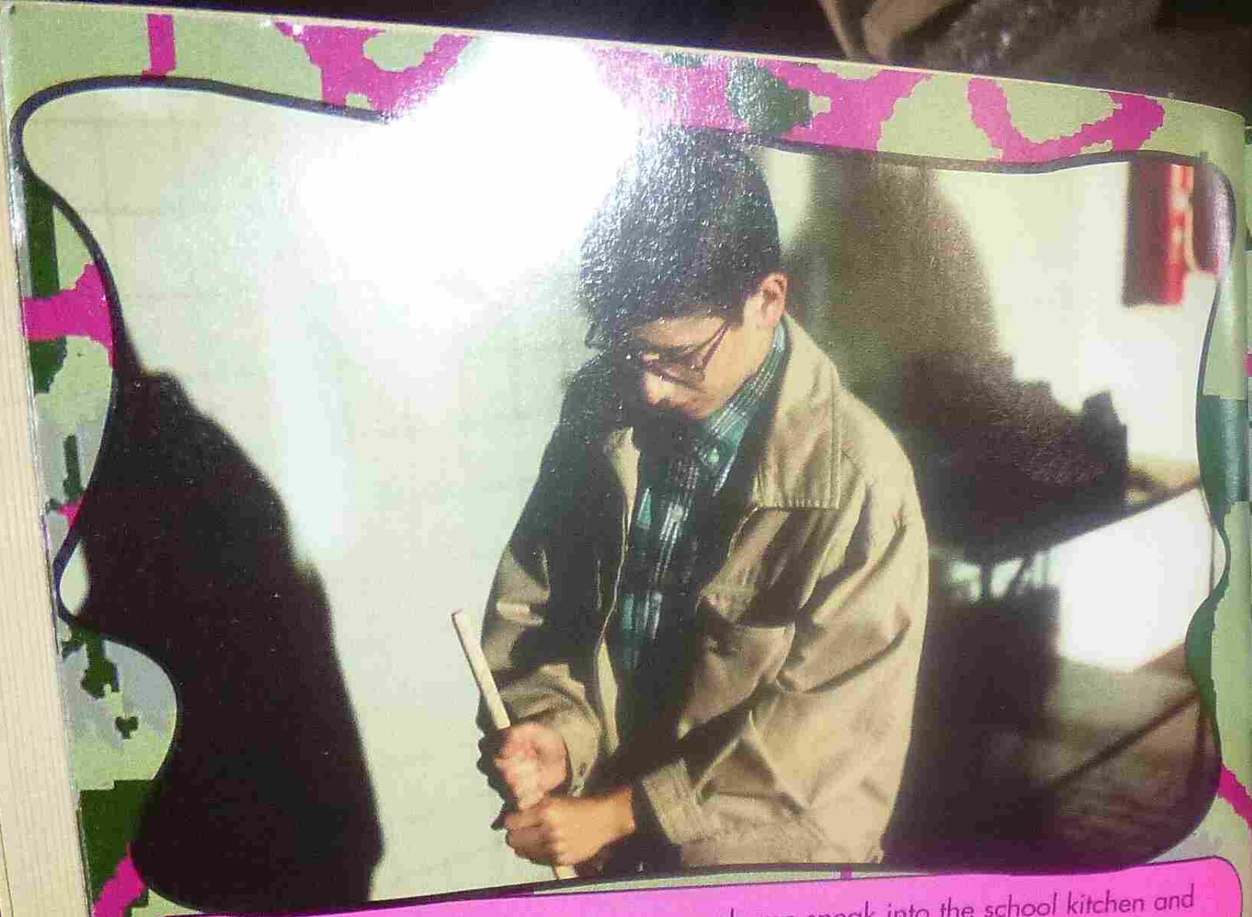


One day Brenda, Wart, and David kidnapped me and took me to the woods. "We got your message, Commander," they said. *Commander?* What did *that* mean?

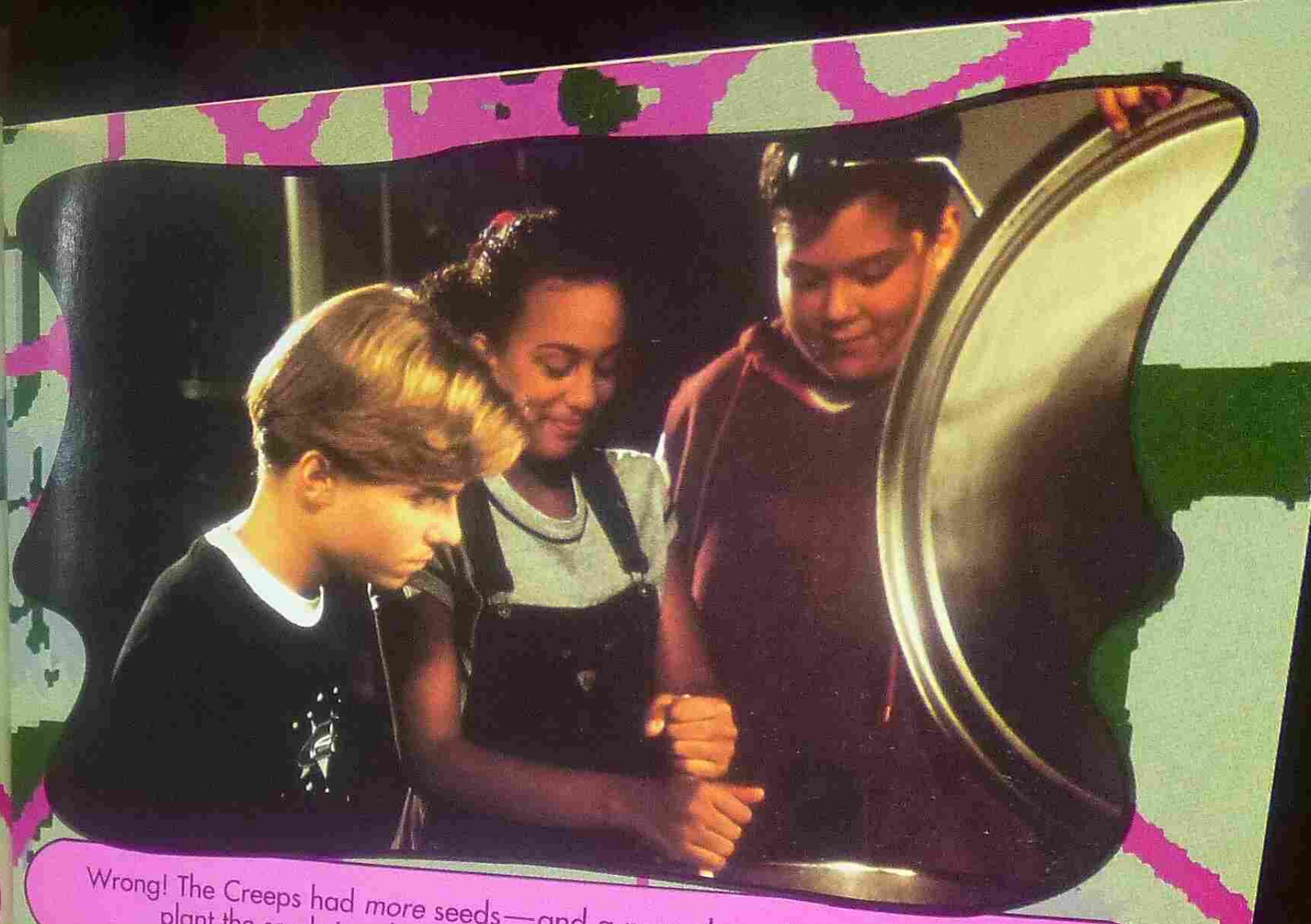


Suddenly they transformed into hideous giant lizards! They said they were Creeps—and I was their leader! If they found out I *wasn't* really a Creep, they were going to *eat* me!

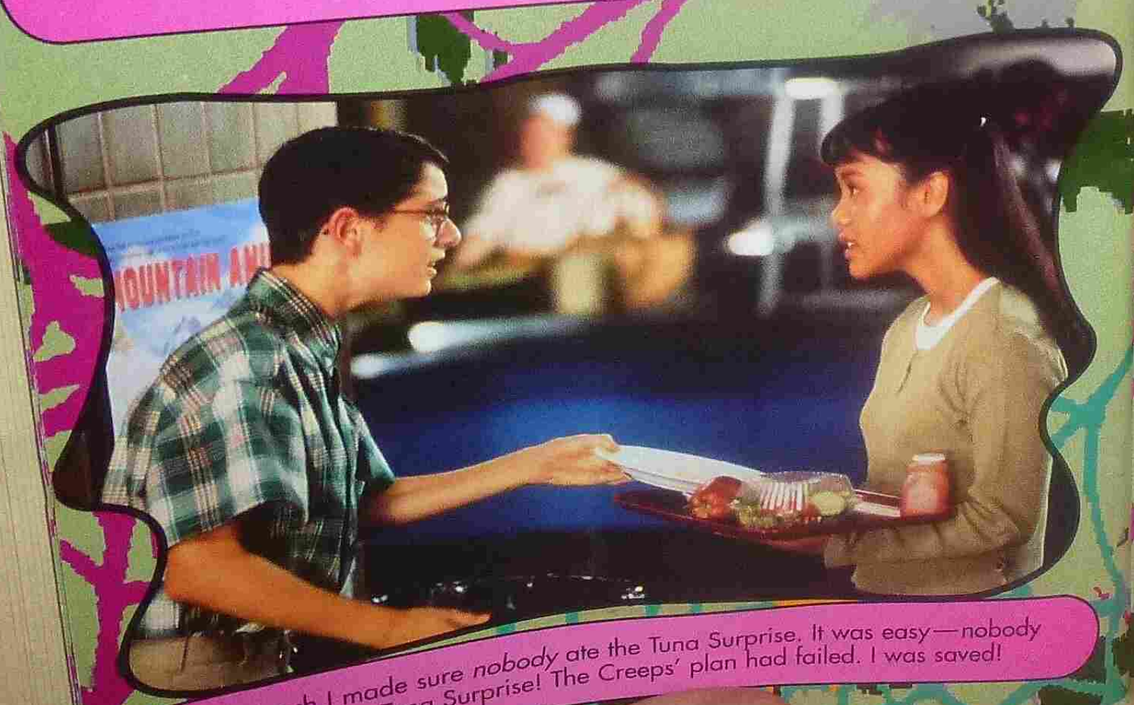
The Creeps told me about their evil plan. They wanted to plant special seeds in the school lunch—seeds that would turn all the kids at school into Creeps!



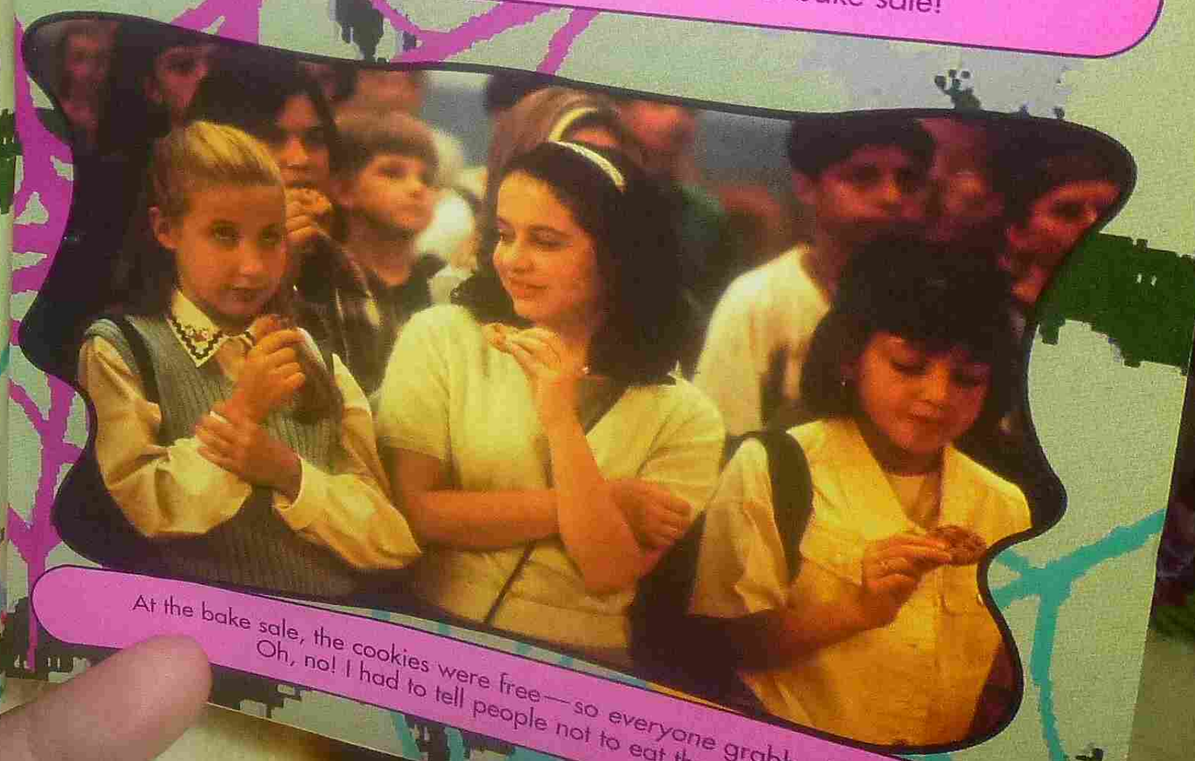
Since I was the leader, the Creeps made me sneak into the school kitchen and dump the bag of seeds into the Tuna Surprise!



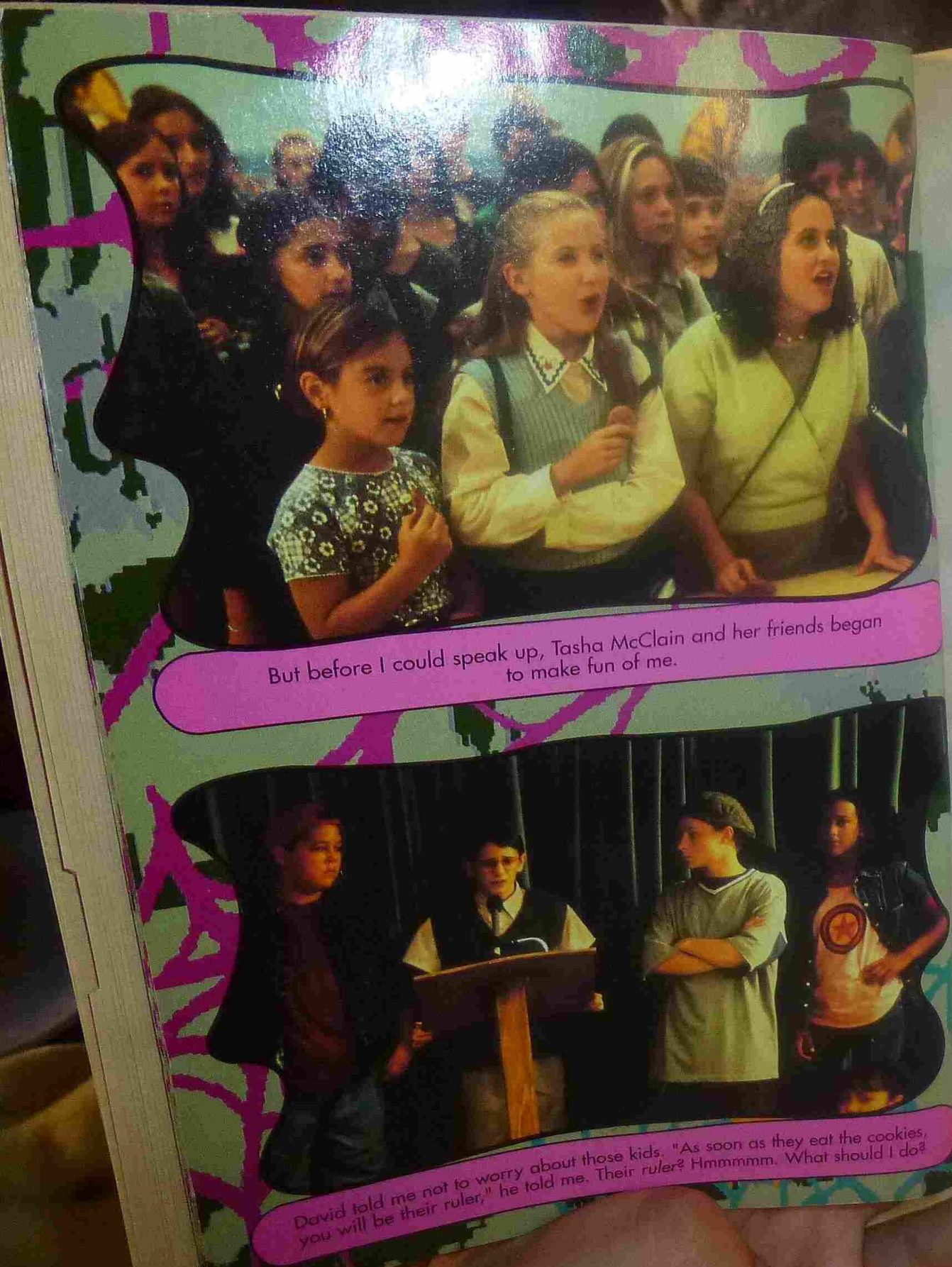
Wrong! The Creeps had *more* seeds—and a new plan. They were going to plant the seeds in a batch of cookies for the school bake sale!



But at lunch I made sure *nobody* ate the Tuna Surprise. It was easy—nobody ever eats the Tuna Surprise! The Creeps' plan had failed. I was saved!



At the bake sale, the cookies were free—so everyone grabbed one! Oh, no! I had to tell people not to eat them!



But before I could speak up, Tasha McClain and her friends began to make fun of me.

David told me not to worry about those kids. "As soon as they eat the cookies, you will be their ruler," he told me. Their *ruler*? Hmmmmm. What should I do?

"Come on, guys," I groaned. "What are you going to do to me? Why are you acting so weird lately?"

Wart dropped to his knees. "Please forgive us," he begged. "We didn't mean to hurt you."

Huh? Was this some kind of joke?

I gazed at him. Even kneeling, he was practically my height.

"You should have told us sooner," David said

"T-told you?" I stammered. What was he talking about?

"We meant you no harm," Brenda added.

Wart was blubbering at my feet. "We didn't know!"

This was too weird. "Wart, get up," I told him.

Instantly, he leaped to his feet. He stood at attention. "Yes, sir!" he cried.

For a second, I thought he was going to salute me.

"We got your message," David told me. "We are ready."

Ready? I wondered. Ready for what?

The three bullies took a step backwards. Then they began to change.

David's cheeks puffed out. And bubbled. Like a pot of oatmeal just beginning to boil.

Brenda shut her eyes. Then they snapped open again. Her eyes glowed yellow. With diamond-shaped pupils! They weren't human eyes anymore. They looked like lizard eyes!

Wart's whole face scrunched up tightly. Scaly spikes burst through his shirt straight out of his neck!

All three of them flung their heads back and howled.

I felt as if I were being choked. I couldn't breathe. Sweat broke out on my forehead.

This can't be happening! I thought. Humans don't turn into giant lizards!

I shut my eyes. "Please be a bad dream," I murmured. "Please!"

But this nightmare was real. Brenda, Wart, and David moaned as if they were in pain.

And then it grew quiet. Too quiet.

I trembled, wondering what I would see when I opened my eyes. But I had to find out. My eyes popped open.

"Oh, man," I moaned.

Standing before me were three kid-sized lizards.

Yellow and purple scales covered their heads. Long claws grew from their reptile hands. Slimy purple tongues flicked in and out of their lizard mouths.

The lizard that used to be David took a step toward me. "We are glad we found you, Commander," he croaked. "The Creeps are ready to serve you."

6

"Don't be afraid," David said.

My head spun. David, Wart, and Brenda weren't just school bullies. They were much more horrifying than that! They were hideous creatures. Lizards!

"We would never hurt you, Commander," Brenda added.

Ha! Like I believed a giant yellow reptile!

And why were they calling me "Commander"?

"We got in touch as soon as we saw your message," Brenda said.

"Time is short," David added.

"We must act quickly," Wart put in.

Brenda held up a clear plastic bag. It was

filled with tiny brown pellets. They looked like chocolate chips.

"Here are the Identity Seeds," Brenda explained. "We must plant them at school. Then everyone will be changed."

"Changed into Creeps!" David cried.

I gasped! These monsters were planning to turn all the kids at school into lizards!

"Humans are the past!" Wart said loudly. "Creeps are the future!"

"High five!" Brenda commanded.

Their tongues shot out and slapped each other in the air. Long purple tongues, dripping slime. I shuddered as I imagined what it would feel like to high-five with a lizard tongue.

"Gross!" I blurted.

The Creeps fixed their yellow eyes on me. Wart's tongue shot toward my face.

"Aaaahhh!" I shrieked. I ducked out of the way.

But Wart wasn't aiming for me. He wrapped his slimy tongue around a grasshopper in the tree behind me. The long

tongue rolled back into his mouth. He swallowed the grasshopper whole!

I moaned and clutched my stomach.

Wart smiled. "Kind of dry," he told me. "But good."

Brenda rolled her lizard eyes. She stepped toward me, shaking the bag. "Remember, Commander," she instructed. "One seed for each kid."

David nodded. "That's all it takes. One seed, and they will all turn into Creeps."

"Yeah!" Brenda cheered. "Creeps like us!"

Oh, no! I couldn't believe what was happening. I grabbed the tree behind me to steady myself. The three Creeps stared at me.

"Tell us your plan, Commander," Wart said.

"Yes, Commander," Brenda joined in. "We need to know!"

"My p-plan?" I stammered. What plan? Was I supposed to come up with a plan to turn everyone I knew into a giant lizard?

The Creeps kept staring at me. "Um . . . I'll tell you tomorrow," I said.

David shook his head. "No time. We need a plan now!"

"Maybe we can put the Identity Seeds in the cafeteria food," Brenda suggested.

"Is that a good plan, Commander?" David asked me.

"I don't know," I replied. "I guess so . . ."

What else could I say? It sounded like a pretty good plan to me. For the Creeps, that is. It was a terrible plan for all the other kids in school!

David peered at me. He leaned in close, holding his yellow scaly face inches from mine. I could smell his sour lizard breath.

He gazed into my eyes. "Are you sure you're our commander?" he demanded. "Because if you're not, we'll have to eat you."

7

"Eat me?" I repeated. My voice came out in a squeak. I cleared my throat and tried to sound tough. "No! It would be bad to eat your commander! And I am definitely your commander."

I watched the three disgusting creatures in front of me. I hoped they believed me.

"Then it's decided," David said. "Seeds in the cafeteria food. It's a good plan, Commander. We salute you."

I tried not to gag when their tongues flicked out and whipped across their yellow foreheads. I figured that was the official Creep salute.

My head was spinning. This was awful. I

never thought my plan to get revenge on Tasha would turn out like *this*!

On Thursday morning I met David, Brenda, and Wart at the cafeteria. It was early — classes didn't start for another half hour.

I was relieved to see that the Creeps were back to being human. Well, as human as those three could ever be.

I peered through the window in the kitchen door. The kitchen was empty.

My mind raced. How could I talk the Creeps out of putting the plan into action? I didn't want to turn the whole school into hideous lizards.

"Maybe we should do this tomorrow," I suggested.

Brenda frowned. "I don't think he's our commander," she said.

"Let's transform!" Wart exclaimed. "I'll eat him!" Wart's reptile tongue startled me. It flicked out of his mouth and hit me in the face.

"Hey!" I yelped. "Watch it! I *am* your commander. And I command you not to eat me!"

"Then plant the seeds," David ordered me.

Brenda shook the little baggie of Identity Seeds at me.

"Uh, yeah." I took the bag from her. "Right. Seeds."

"We'll be watching," Wart warned.

He shoved me through the swinging door into the kitchen.

I gazed around. For the first time ever, I wished a teacher would catch me. Maybe I'd get detention! Or suspended! That would solve everything.

I glanced back at the door. David, Wart, and Brenda glared at me through the round window. They were watching my every move.

There was no way to back out.

David nodded toward the large pot cooking on the stove. I was supposed to "plant the seeds" in the pot.

I crossed to the stove. I stood on tiptoe and peered into the pot.

Eeeeeewwww. My nose wrinkled at the disgusting smell. "Tuna Surprise!" I exclaimed. "Yuck!"

Wait a minute, I thought. No one *ever* eats the Tuna Surprise. And if the kids don't eat it, they won't eat the seeds. And that means nobody will turn into a monster!

But the Creeps can't blame me — so they won't eat me!

It was perfect!

I nodded back at David. Then I dumped the whole bag of seeds into the pot of Tuna Surprise.

I shivered as I thought about a school full of Creeps. I hope I'm right about this, I thought. I hope nobody touches the Tuna Surprise today.

David waved in the window. He made a stirring motion with his hands.

I quickly picked up a spoon from the counter. I stirred the Tuna Surprise. The Identity Seeds disappeared into it.

"What are you doing in here?" a voice demanded.

I jumped and looked up — into Mrs. Urick's scowling face. She was the head cafeteria worker. I'm saved! I thought. Now's my chance to tell on the Creeps!

I glanced back at the window. David, Brenda, and Wart had vanished.

"You can't serve this lunch!" I told Mrs. Urick.

She glared at me. "This is good, nutritious food." She spooned up a big glop of Tuna Surprise. She held it right under my nose. "Here," she commanded. "Try some."

"No!" I took a step backwards. Tuna Surprise was bad enough. But this batch was full of Identity Seeds!

Mrs. Urick held the spoon right up to my lips. "It's good," she said. "Eat!"

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I squirmed away from Mrs. Urick. I darted to the kitchen door. "Sorry!" I called over my shoulder. "But I never eat tuna in the morning." I shoved open the door and ran.

Whew! That was close! But what if someone else ate the Tuna Surprise? It was the only thing I could think about all day long.

I had no choice. I had to make sure that nobody in the entire school ate the Tuna Surprise for lunch.

I stood in the cafeteria at lunchtime. As kids walked past me, I stared at their trays.

"Tacos. Good choice!" I told a girl from my home room. She ignored me.

A guy in a baseball cap passed by. "Meat

loaf," I announced. I gave him a thumbs-up. "Can't go wrong there." He shot me an annoyed look.

Everyone already thinks I'm a nerd, I realized. Now they're going to think I'm crazy, too.

I wiped my forehead. I felt so nervous, I was sweating. I jumped when someone came up behind me.

"Good plan, Commander," David whispered in my ear.

"Uh, thanks," I replied. As usual, Brenda and Wart followed right behind him.

"They should begin to change soon," Brenda murmured. She glanced around the cafeteria. Then she, David, and Wart wandered off.

"Hey, Ricky!"

I turned at the sound of Iris's voice. She flashed a friendly smile at me.

"Hi, Iris," I replied. I glanced at her lunch.

Oh, no! Tuna Surprise! It was piled high on the plate. There were probably five Identity Seeds in that one helping!

I snatched the plate off her tray.

"What are you doing?" Iris asked. Her eyes widened.

"You can't eat that!" I cried. I dumped her lunch into the trash. Plate included.

Iris stared down at the tray in her hands. All that was left on it was a carton of milk and an apple.

"But I wanted to try the Tuna Surprise," Iris complained.

"No, you didn't," I told her. "Take my word for it."

Iris gazed at me for a moment. Then she shrugged. "The bake sale is tomorrow. Are you still helping me after school today?" she asked.

"Huh?" I wasn't paying much attention. I had to keep track of the lunches going by. Chicken à la King. Another meat loaf. Lunch from home. More Chicken à la King.

Iris's voice broke into my thoughts. "Earth to Ricky!" she said.

"Huh?" I repeated. "What did you say?"

"Are you still helping me today?" she asked.

"Helping you?"

"With the bake sale!" Iris snapped.

I could tell she was annoyed. But I couldn't help it. What if someone ate those Identity Seeds?

"Look," I told Iris. "I can't talk right now."

Iris glared at me. "Fine." She stalked away.

"Wait!" I called after her. "Iris!"

But she stormed out of the cafeteria.

I sighed. Thanks a lot, Creeps, I thought. Iris was the only person who didn't think I was a nerd.

Now she just thinks I'm a total jerk.

"You messed up the plan!" David snapped. He was back in his lizard shape. He shoved me against the same tree as yesterday. Then he flicked his tongue in my face.

I pulled my head back.

"It's not my fault no one ate the Identity Seeds!" I protested. Brenda and Wart's scaly claws gripped me tighter. They hadn't let go of my arms since they'd grabbed me after school.

"Nobody eats the Tuna Surprise!" David snarled. "You knew that! And that's why the plan failed!"

Uh-oh. David figured out my idea. I tried to come up with an excuse.

"But I didn't realize it was the Tuna Surprise!" I lied. "I thought I put the Identity Seeds in the Chicken à la King!"

My heart thumped as I gazed at their reptile faces. I hoped they believed me.

Brenda's yellow eyes narrowed. "He's lying," she said.

"I don't think he's our commander," David agreed.

"Let's eat him!" Wart exclaimed.

I smelled their lizard breath as they flicked their slimy tongues in my face. I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't want to see the Creeps' razor-sharp teeth when they began to chomp me.

"Commander!" a familiar voice cried. "Maybe you should reveal your *real* plan!"

My eyes popped wide open.

Iris stepped out of the bushes. She wore a

stern expression on her face. I'd never seen her look so serious.

The Creeps' tongues flicked rapidly as they stared at her. She took another step toward us.

"Sergeant Iris reporting for duty!" she announced.

My mouth dropped open in shock.

Iris? One of the Creeps? No way!

9

The Creeps' yellow lizard eyes darted back and forth between Iris and me. Wart snarled.

"Who are you?" David demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"I told you. I'm Sergeant Iris," Iris told him. "I'm second in command."

Whoa! My knees buckled.

Iris wasn't just any Creep. She was one of the top Creeps! She faced David, nose to nose.

Well, nose to scaly snout.

"The first plan was a test," Iris told David. "To see if you Creeps were truly ready. Congratulations. You passed."

She smiled at the Creeps. They didn't smile back.

"Now we can put the real plan into action," she went on.

"We can?" I blurted.

The Creeps stared at me. Brenda's sharp claws dug into my arm.

I cleared my throat. "Um, I mean, of course we can!"

I twisted my arm in Brenda's grip. "Give your commander some room to breathe!" I ordered.

Brenda and Wart glanced at each other. They looked confused. But they let go of me.

"Good," Iris nodded. "The plan begins back at school."

"Yum!" Wart exclaimed. He licked his lips as Iris mixed together a batch of cookie dough in a large bowl.

The Creeps had changed back into their human forms before we went into the school

kitchen. Other kids were working there, too — so the Creeps kept their voices quiet.

"It's a good thing we had more seeds," Brenda declared. She emptied the plastic bag of Identity Seeds over the bowl.

"The commander knew we had backup seeds," Iris said. "Didn't you, Commander?"

"Um . . . of course I knew!" I answered.

Then Iris dropped in chocolate chips. I shook my head. I still couldn't believe she was one of the Creeps.

"The commander's *real* plan is excellent!" Iris announced. "We'll bring these cookies to the bake sale tomorrow morning."

David grinned. "Brilliant! Everybody loves chocolate chip cookies! Especially when they're *free*!"

"And then all the kids will turn into Creeps!" Brenda added.

"And Creeps will rule!" Wart cheered.

"Yeah, great," I muttered.

David was right. It *was* a brilliant plan.

And unless I figured out some way to stop

it, the entire school would turn into evil, slimy, disgusting Creeps.

I glanced at Iris. *Sergeant* Iris, I reminded myself.

It had been her plan in the first place. Maybe I could convince her not to go through with it.

Maybe.

"Uh, Sergeant?" I began. Iris stopped stirring and gazed at me. "Can I talk to you? You know — Commander to, um, second in command?"

"Of course." Iris followed me out of the kitchen.

We huddled in the hallway. Iris stood silently, waiting for me to say something. But I wasn't sure how to begin.

"About the plan, Sergeant," I started.

"You don't have to call me that," Iris cut me off. "Those gross Creeps can't hear us out here."

"You — you're not one of them?" I asked.

"Of course not!" Iris cried.

I felt so relieved, I laughed out loud. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!" I said.

"But how did you know about them?"

Iris shrugged. "I was on my way to meet you at the yogurt shop. Even though you acted like a jerk at lunch today."

"Sorry," I mumbled. "But I —"

Iris interrupted me. "It doesn't matter," she said. "Anyway, I took the shortcut through the woods and I heard your voice. When I saw those three" — Iris jerked her head toward the kitchen — "I couldn't believe it!"

She shuddered. I did, too.

"I almost ran away," Iris admitted. "I mean, those Creeps are really creepy!"

"Creepy?" I repeated. "They're disgusting! And evil."

Iris nodded. "No kidding. When I saw they were going to attack you, I knew I had to do something!"

"I'm glad you did!" I told her. Then I remembered why I had dragged Iris into the

hallway. "But, Iris, what about the plan?" I asked. "What if everyone at school eats the cookies?"

"I don't know." Iris frowned. "We'll figure something out."

"You're right," I said. Between the two of us, we would definitely think of a way to stop the Creeps.

Then I heard the chanting from the kitchen.

"Humans are the past! Creeps are the future!

"Humans are the past! Creeps are the future!"

Iris and I stared at each other. The chanting grew louder.

"At least, I *hope* we'll figure something out," Iris murmured.

10

Iris and I stood by our empty table in the Harding Middle School cafeteria. The bake sale had just started. The air was filled with the delicious smells of peanut butter bars, brownies, and oatmeal cookies.

But I didn't feel hungry. My stomach was filled with butterflies!

Any second the Creeps would arrive. Carrying cookies that would turn the whole school into a group of giant lizards. And it would be all my fault!

Tasha McClain walked toward me. "Oh, great," I muttered. As usual, a group of her snotty friends followed her.

"Iris!" Tasha called. She stopped at our

table. "I can't believe you're friends with this Creep. That makes *you* a creep, too!"

Tasha flipped her dark hair. Her friends giggled. I could still hear them laughing as they wandered away.

"If she knew what a real Creep was, she wouldn't be laughing," Iris grumbled.

"Uh-oh," I murmured.

"What?" Iris asked.

I pointed to Brenda, David, and Wart. They headed toward us. Their arms were loaded down with trays of cookies.

Chocolate chip Identity Seed cookies.

David laid a tray on the table in front of me. "We're ready, Commander," he announced.

Just what I was afraid of.

"Listen, guys," I began.

But before I could finish, Wart turned to the rest of the kids. "Free cookies!" he shouted. "Chocolate chip! Come and get them!"

Brenda set her tray down and joined in. "Free cookies," she called.

"Oh, no," Iris whispered. "Look!"

Tasha turned back toward our table. "*Free* cookies?" she asked. She tugged on Kim's sleeve. They hurried over to us. "Hey, everybody!" Tasha yelled. "These nerds are giving away cookies!"

All the kids at the sale rushed toward the table, shouting and yelling.

"Free cookies!"

"All right!"

"Chocolate chip! My favorite!"

Kids grabbed the cookies. They shoved them into their pockets. Filled their fists.

"Now what do we do?" Iris whispered. "If they eat those cookies, they'll all turn into Creeps!"

"Wait!" I shouted. "Stop!"

But no one heard me. They were too busy yelling to each other about the cookies.

I had to do something! Before anyone took a bite!

"Ricky! Look on the stage!" Iris cried. I glanced behind me. A microphone lay at the edge of the wooden stage.

I jumped onstage and grabbed it.

"Wait!" My voice boomed out over the sound system. "Stop!"

Tasha stood right below me. "It's Ricky the Rat!" she yelled. "Look at the Rat onstage!"

I stared down at her.

Tasha sneered at me. "What's the matter, Ricky the Rat? Cat got your rat-tongue?" She laughed really hard. Her crowd of friends joined in.

Then she started chanting, "Ricky the Rat! Ricky the Rat!"

"Wait!" I tried again. "Listen to me!"

But now all the kids in the cafeteria began to chant along with Tasha.

"Ricky the Rat! Ricky the Rat!" echoed through the cafeteria.

"You don't understand —" I pleaded.

The chanting grew louder. And louder!

"Ricky the Rat! Ricky the Rat!"

It sounded as if the whole school were screaming that horrible nickname.

I gazed at the crowd of kids. Some of their faces wore nasty expressions. Others were

laughing. A few kids pointed at me. All of them were shouting. Teasing. Making fun of me.

They like picking on me, I realized. All of them. They think it's fun.

They're a whole group of bullies.

David, Brenda, and Wart climbed onto the stage beside me. Iris scrambled up, too. They stared at all the screaming faces.

"Commander," David whispered, "don't worry about these stupid kids. As soon as they eat the cookies, you will be their ruler."

I wasn't sure if I heard him right. "Their *ruler*?" I repeated.

"Of course!" Brenda replied. "They'll be your slaves!"

"They'll have to do anything you say," Wart added.

I gazed out at the crowd of kids. They were still screaming. "Ricky the Rat! Ricky the Rat!" Someone threw a wad of paper. Then a brownie flew from the crowd and smacked me in the face.

Tasha and the other kids shrieked with

laughter. She jumped up and down as if she were a cheerleader, leading the chant.

I spoke into the microphone again. "Attention, everyone. I just wanted to say —"

But they didn't listen. They were busy chanting.

"Ricky the Rat! Ricky the Rat!"

I gazed at their laughing faces one last time.

And I made a decision.

"I just wanted to say . . . enjoy the cookies!" I announced.

"What a Creep!" Tasha said. Then she took a big bite of her cookie.

I held an Identity Seed cookie up to my mouth.

Iris grabbed my arm. "Ricky!" she cried. "No!"

I turned to face her. "Sorry, Iris. But from now on, things are going to be different around here."

I took a deep breath. Then I popped the cookie into my mouth. I swallowed it whole, without even chewing.

A warm feeling spread through my body. My skin began to bubble. My arms grew stronger. Scales covered my body. Spikes burst from my neck. My tongue grew longer.

I looked out at the crowd of kids through my yellow eyes.

The chanting changed, I realized.

The voices shouted something else. Something new.

Something great.

"Hail to our commander!" they cried. "King Ricky! King of the Creeps!"

Yup. I was going to like being the commander.

Being a Creep wasn't so creepy after all.